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ABSTRACT

This literature review concerns the concept of alternative grade configurations at the elementary level, in which elementary schools are subdivided into primary (K-2) and intermediate (3-5) units. Because of the paucity of literature on this concept, the major part of the report focuses on the reorganization of the elementary schools of the South Allegheny (Pennsylvania) school district. Although the K-2, 3-5 structure is often implemented in response to declining enrollment, other educational benefits cited may include better concentration on the educational and psychological needs of children in the two age groups, though one research study showed no significant differences in student achievement, attitude toward school, extracurricular participation, or career aspiration. The goals of the South Allegheny reorganization (in response to declining enrollment) were to equalize class sizes to facilitate multilevel instruction in reading and math, and to make better use of staff, school buildings, and instructional resources. Each of these objectives is described in detail, along with perceived disadvantages. An evaluative report revealed that the new grade structure saved money and resulted in improved discipline, student attitudes, and student interaction. Finally, literature on the implementation process is briefly reviewed, emphasizing the need for clear articulation between grade levels. Notes and references are included. (TE)

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PRIMARY AND INTERMEDIATE GRADE CONFIGURATIONS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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PRIMARY AND INTERMEDIATE GRADE CONFIGURATIONS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Many school districts have considered alternative grade configurations in response to declining enrollment. In order to cope with such problems as uneven student distribution, limited instructional resources and inadequate facilities, some districts have reorganized the grade levels. There is a very limited amount of material on the primary and intermediate (K-2 and 3-5) configuration. There are at least two studies of districts with primary and intermediate schools and some additional literature discussing this alternative. The fact that there is little in the literature on this concept does not mean that it is not widely practiced; it simply means few people have written about it.

The major part of this report will focus on the reorganization of the elementary schools of the South Allegheny (Pennsylvania) School District. This was the best documented reorganization found in the literature.

Grade Organization Research

The research on grade organization does not clearly favor any particular configuration; no one pattern has been shown to improve student achievement or adjustment better than any other. The literature recommends that the decision be based on local facility and curricular requirements.[1] This is clearly a local decision based on the needs in the district. The literature recommends checking the available research at the beginning of the decision making process and identifying alternative courses of action from which to choose.[2] This might involve talking to people from other districts which use alternative grade configurations.

A survey in 1975 found that 12% of school districts in the United States had primary (K-2 or K-3) schools.[3] Although the K-2, 3-5 structure

is often implemented in response to declining enrollment, there may be educational benefits. This structure makes it possible to concentrate on the needs of the children in each of the two age groups, primary and intermediate.[4] It is possible that primary and intermediate students have differing psychological needs. They may also need different educational facilities.[5] A primary school might not need as complete a facility as an intermediate school; primary students might have less need for a complete cafeteria, gym and auditorium, for example.[6]

One researcher studied a situation where grades kindergarten through eight were housed in one school and compared this with a K-3, 4-6, 7-8 configuration. There were no significant differences in student achievement, attitude toward school, participation in extracurricular activities or career aspiration.[7] Neither grade structure was found to be more or less successful than the other.

One District's Reorganization

In 1975, the South Allegheny (Pennsylvania) School District restructured all of its elementary schools into primary and intermediate schools. The change was in response to declining enrollment. The district set up goals and objectives for the grade reorganization. The overall goals were to equalize class sizes, to facilitate multilevel instruction in reading and math and to better utilize staff, school buildings and instructional resources.[8]

Class Size and Grouping

One of the main goals was to even out class sizes at 30 or less. Because enrollment varied by geographical area within this large district, there were unequal class sizes at various schools.[9] A related objective was to create more sections of each grade level at each school. If there were

four second grade classes in the district they could all be put into one school rather than spread out over four schools.

The district also wanted to have more levels of reading and math instruction, the two subject areas in which ability grouping was used. It was felt that the primary and intermediate grade structure would allow better grouping of students with similar abilities in reading and math.

Instruction and Interaction

It was also hoped that the new grade organization would improve the instructional climate. The talents and enthusiasm of teachers could be combined, creating a team atmosphere with more teachers from each grade level. There would be more opportunities for the sharing of ideas among teachers and between teachers and students.

The new grade structure was also intended to make it possible to pool instructional materials and equipment. More materials would be available to each teacher. The reorganization was seen as a chance to improve school libraries and create better conditions for the sports and music programs.[10]

Another objective was to improve interaction among students. Because the primary and intermediate students would be separated, the older students would no longer dominate the younger ones. Individual students who had personality conflicts with other students could be assigned to different classrooms now that there would be more classrooms for each grade level.[11]

Disadvantages

Several possible disadvantages of the new grade structure were pointed out. Bus transportation would be needed, adding to costs and necessitating more organization and supervision. Some children would have to walk farther to school. Older brothers and sisters might now be assigned to different

schools from their younger siblings and might not be able to walk them to school.[12]

Organization

This large district created several primary and intermediate schools. Interestingly, in one case a small primary and a small intermediate school shared the same building. This school did not experience benefits from the reorganization.[13] Some of the primary schools housed grades kindergarten through three, while some contained only the first through third grades. This resulted from a decision that the kindergarten classes would not be moved from the schools that presently housed them. Because of this policy, some of the intermediate schools included kindergarten and grades four through six.[14]

Evaluation

According to the report, the grade reorganization saved the district $42,000.[16] It is difficult to gauge the significance of this amount of money, since it was in 1975 dollars and the report did not state what percentage of the district's budget this savings represented. In any case, it can be noted that the reconfiguration did save the district money.

After the new grade structure was implemented, the district experienced a general overall improvement in discipline, student attitudes and student interaction.[17] This district's reorganization proved to be a positive experience.

Implementation Process

The literature recommends the following process for implementing grade reorganization. The first step is to check the research on grade configurations and identify alternative structures. Assuming the district decides to go ahead with implementation, the next step is to formulate

goals and objectives for the reorganization. Plans for implementation should be made well in advance, if possible. The reorganization should be designed to improve instruction and the curriculum. It is very important to set up a process for articulation between the grade levels.

The rationale for the change should be communicated to the parents and the community. For example, the rationale might be to save money, to cope with declining enrollment or to better use educational facilities.

According to the literature, the most important aspect of reorganizing the grade levels is not what configuration is chosen, but how it is implemented. The key to successful implementation is articulation. As this author put it, "A district's choice of (K-2, 3-5, 6-8) isn't as important as what happens across the hyphens. Any organizational plan can be made to work, but good articulation between school levels . . . (is) required to assure needed continuity of learning activities."[18]

Grade organization is an important decision, and examining the experiences of other districts may prove helpful. Although grade reorganization is a controversial issue, the main concern of everyone involved is to achieve the best possible education the district can provide for its students.

NOTES

[1]Howard M. Johnson, "Grade Organization: A Decision Based on Local District Needs and Resources," NASSP Bulletin, March 1982, pp. 106-108.

[2]Johnson, p. 110.

[3]Fritz Hess et al., "Organization of Schools: An Overview of Alternative Grade Level Arrangements," in Issues in Education: A Documented Look at Seven Current Topics, 1978, ERIC Document ED 158 391, p. 29.

[4]Hess, p. 28.

[5]Hess, p. 43.

[6]Hess, p. 27.

[7]Edward R. Caliste, Do School Organizational Patterns Make a Difference?, 1975, ERIC Document ED 116 344, pp. 6-7.

[8]Robert S. Piatt, "A Reorganized Elementary School Structure to Accomodate Declining Enrollment" (Ed.D. practicum, Nova University, 1975), ERIC Document ED 111 111, abstract.

[9]Piatt, pp. 6, 8.

[10]Piatt, pp. 7-8.

[11]Piatt, p. 8.

[12]Piatt, p. 8.

[13]Piatt, pp. 7, 50.

[14]Piatt, pp. 57, 62.

[15]Piatt, p. 22.

[16]Piatt, p. 28.

[17]Piatt, p. 41.

[18]Johnson, pp. 110-113.

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This paper is intended as an unbiased review of the literature and does not reflect positions or opinions of the San Mateo County Office of Education.

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